

JESÚS H. RAMIREZ (South Florida)

Repression in the Existential Lives of Dostoevsky's *Poor People*

Abstract

This paper explores Sigmund Freud's concept of repression in the existential strife exhibited by two main characters, Makar Alexyevitch and Varvara Alexyevna, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Poor People. To demonstrate this, I psychoanalyze of how they handle their repressed desires, emphasizing the necessity of Freud's main rule for this method: Openness. Dostoevsky's Poor People presents an existential crisis handled through openness and mishandled when an individual represses one's desires. In delving into Dostoevsky's first novel, I demonstrate a link between the existential and psychological, wherein individuals strive to overcome themselves. Surprisingly, this link has a come a common influence between Dostoevsky and Freud: Immanuel Kant. I briefly discuss this shared similarity to show the basic idea of an "existential middle" derived from a Freudian psychoanalysis of Dostoevsky's Poor People.

Keywords: Freud, Dostoevsky, repression, psychoanalysis, existentialism

1. Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Poor People* was published in 1846 to much acclaim. Even Dostoevsky was proud of his accomplishment, telling his brother, "They find in me a new and original spirit in that I proceed by analysis and not by synthesis, i.e., I plunge into the depths, and while analyzing every atom, I search out the whole: Gogol takes a direct path and hence is not so profound as I. Read and see for yourself. Brother, I have a most brilliant future before me!" (Dostoevsky 1960, 8). It is interesting how confident Dostoevsky was in his capacity as a burgeoning writer when one of the main characters of *Poor People*, Makar Alexyevitch, is meek. The other main character, Varvara Alexyevna, is not as weak-kneed, but she is still like Makar in other material and psychological respects: They are both poor, living across each other, and in need of a friend. Dostoevsky wrote *Poor People* as a correspondence between the two but shows Makar romantically pining for Varvara without reciprocation. Varvara (sometimes "Varinka") simply wants a loving friendship. Each wants to be loved. Varvara wants the love and attention of any person who is kind enough to give

her the time. The friends are desperate for each other's attention, albeit from different intentions. Tragically, when Varinka's need for Makar wanes, we understand that his inability to transcend his poor condition means she would never survive to improve her desperate conditions if she were to take him as more than a friend.

Consequently, *Poor People* is not just a psychological and existential story of friendship, but a tragic story of the growth of one individual over another. Makar and Varinka complement each other, but Varvara existentially gains from this relationship because she is at least more honest than Makar. A Freudian psychoanalysis of our poor friends would help us understand the dichotomy of repression and honesty in their relationship, where an individual must undo the repression to flourish. Yet, there's a rather notable link between Dostoevsky and Freud: Kant. They both shared an interest in his work, and it is Kant's influence with respect to how he finds a critical path between noumena and phenomena that seems to have facilitated an attempt at negotiating a semblance of opposites through honest reflection. In this paper, I will use Freud's concept of repression to demonstrate how Makar represses himself throughout his correspondence with Varvara, indicating that he may not have the ability to reconcile his ideals with his desires: I hold that Makar's psychological repression is his failed negotiation of his instinctual impulses (Id) and his conscious (Ego) stifling of them, an action facilitated by a dominating Superego. Alternatively, I show Varinka's reconciliation of her Id and Ego, by an aspect of her unconscious Superego that seeks openness, overcoming the dominating feature of her Superego. Finally, I will show that both characters' handling of their repression is psychological evidence of the strife that exists when one is within, what I call, an "existential middle."

2. Freud's Repression

Although Freud downplayed philosophy throughout his career, it is undeniable that his concept of repression had a connection to a philosophical infrastructure in which the human mind was a stage for dueling forces (Tauber 2009). Freud wrote

In psycho-analysis there is no choice for us to assert that mental processes are themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the sense of organs. We can even hope to gain fresh knowledge from the comparison. The psycho-analytic assumption of unconscious mental activity appears to us [...] as an extension of the corrections undertaken by Kant of our views on external perception. Just as Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with what is perceived though unknowable, so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object. (Freud 1915a, 171)

Freud ruminated on a Kant-like division of mental forces. Where Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* explained the division of noumena and phenomena, Freud talks of the unconscious and conscious. However, this binary becomes a trio when another element introduces itself to negotiate the schism between the two: The Superego. Alfred I. Tauber writes "According to Freud, the tyranny of the despotic unconscious would be broken by reason's autonomy, by its ability to free itself from disguised and hidden psychic forces to discern deterministic causes of overt behaviors and thought that hitherto were inaccessible" (Tauber 2009a, 8). Division occurs in Freud, as it does with Kant, and a third party must balance out the needs of one with the rules of the other. Psychoanalysis is thought to negotiate this divide because if such a balance is not worked out then we see the emergence of repression in Freud. Hence, Freud held that "*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*" (Freud 1915b, 147). Without honest interrogation of oneself (following the critical path in Kant) the repression persists and the individual's psychological condition worsens.

Kant's middle ground between noumena and phenomena in the *Critique of Pure Reason* serves, in my view, as an existential middle, a situation where the individual must critically reflect on whether she will overcome herself. It is a middle in which the individual is at a crossroads between their phenomenal desiring selves and a ruling part. To sever these two amounts to a splitting of the mind. Rather, a harmony is sought between the two by way of critical analysis. Whereas Kant's work was concerned with an epistemological and metaphysical critique, we can see its utility when adapted to the mind in Freud. The Id desires. The Ego tries to hold back the Id via the mandates of the Superego. Freud writes, "From this ego proceed the repressions, too, by means of which it is sought to exclude certain trends in the mind not merely from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity" (Freud 1960, 7). The Ego tries to repress the instinctual drives of the Id to protect the individual. The common view of this is that the Ego is trying to repress traumatic memories, but as Simon Boag writes, "The lack of appreciation for the fundamental postulates of instinctual drives and conflict has also meant that Freud's concept of repression has become enmeshed with the recovered memories debate" (Boag 2006, 80). Rather, Freud's short piece, specifically called *Repression* explains that "repression entails psychical conflict" in which "repression primarily targets 'wishes' (the ideational representative of instinctual drives) whose satisfaction is believed to lead to danger" (Boag 2006, 78). This would give new meaning to the idea that one must "listen to their heart," but in Freud we can say that the heart is the unknown aspect of the unconscious Superego that is attempting to compassionately reflect on existence instead of the other aspect of the Superego that serves as a dictator to the Ego.

Some people colloquially say that "you should listen to your heart" or "follow your heart," which does not necessarily mean you succumb to your base desires but is rather a call to seek the guidance of a compassionate and reflective aspect of your mind. Evgenia Cherkasova's *Dostoevsky and Kant: Dialogues on Ethics* talks about a "deontology of the heart." Cherkasova calls it a "way of thinking" that "leaves behind the archaic distinction between the allegedly superior powers of reason and inferior primal emotional energies. Instead, it emphasizes the interplay between reason and the heart in all its subtlety and richness" (Cherkasova 2009, 3).

Cherkasova's use "deontology of the heart" is, perhaps, more poetic than what I would say. The middle ground that Kant, Dostoevsky, and Freud all discuss, is, I observe, an "existential middle." That is, the conflict arising from what one needs in Freud, the phenomenal needs of the person in Kant, and the needs of the main characters in Freud produces an existential middle. Here, the individual must harmonize the confrontation within one's mind. The only outlet (as far as Freud, Kant, and from what we'll see in Dostoevsky) available to begin overcoming the existential middle is a kind of critical openness. Epistemologically, Kant pointed out this critical path at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. His ethics argue for a negotiation of the noumenal's guidance of the phenomenal. Freud's work suggests an aspect of the unconscious that is virtually unknown to each person. Finally, Dostoevsky's first work, *Poor People*, is a back and forth between two opposites, Makar and Varinka, who start similarly, but end up on different paths by way of a critical self-assessment for the latter, and not the former. Pulling the Kantian and Dostoevskian parts together, Cherkasova writes that the

Deontology of the heart accounts for the dark and destructive, as well as creative, traits of human character. It draws from the intricate existentialist insights about the nature of freedom, choice, will, and their attendant anxiety and responsibility. This version of deontology celebrates the ethical ideal of "wholeheartedness" and views human beings, qua moral agents, as irreducible to the sum of their social, historical, physiological, and genetic factors. Finally, by defending a phenomenological account of an individual as a shared self, embodied and rooted in a community, the deontology of the heart seeks to overcome the abstractive dualisms of reason and passions, the spiritual and the mundane, the individual and the communal. (Cherkasova 2009, 3-4)

Cherkasova's analysis of the commonality of Kant and Dostoevsky found in the "deontology of the heart" is a testament to this existential issue of negotiating the middle. "The dark and destructive [...] traits of the human character" need a pushback, a critique, so as to mitigate the problem of repression that afflicts the individual. I take Dostoevsky's characters, Makar and Varvara, to be an example of what happens when the existential middle is traversed for the better (Varvara) and acquiesced to for the worse (Makar).

The Superego's rational reconciliation of instincts with the Ego is the key to overcoming the existential middle. As scholar, Alfred I. Tauber, writes, "Freud was a champion of human freedom, which he directed towards fulfilling creative human potential" and the process of "psychoanalysis becomes a means for the achievement of a state of health that permits the pursuit of a life fulfilled," (Tauber 2009, 39). The individual's existential situation is a product her being a confluence of being a determined organism and a human with free will. It simply becomes a matter of how an individual understands their experience through openness for the freedom to come about. In *Poor People*, Varinka's "deontology of the heart" comes out because of this open willingness to be free beyond the constraints of what she has so far been determined to be. Makar takes a different path.

As we will see, Makar is the heart of *Poor People*. He is a necessary foundation for the reader to understand how Varvara handles the existential middle. Makar denies himself such change. Varvara is honest with herself, so she speaks her mind. Makar denies expressing his true desires, writing so little about his past to Varvara that she lacks context for understanding some of his odd actions: His penchants for being in debt and getting drunk. Through their letters, Dostoevsky teaches us the consequences of succumbing to one side without thoughtful reflection.

3. Varvara's Past

The most beautiful section of *Poor People* is Varvara's letters to Makar regarding her childhood. She writes that she and her mother were often sick. During those times, Varvara received tutoring by a gentleman named Pokrovsky, a man she pined for until his death. Pokrovsky often gave her books and while she did not care too much to read them, she was awestruck by his intellectual and studious demeanor. All the while, Varinka avers to Makar that she can no longer bear to live poor and sick. Unloading her deepest worries, she tracks her progress in life, realizing nothing has changed for the better, nor will it change unless she decides to leave her squalor. Yet, until she's in the position to choose, she continues to feel undermined almost every time she writes to Makar about her life as a poor and sick young lady.

Varvara's hope for a better life seems to be embodied by her admiration for her tutor, Pokrovsky. Interestingly, he had a troubled relationship with his father. Pokrovsky loathed his father; his father loved him. As Varinka becomes familiar with Pokrovsky's father, the reader notices Varvara's connection to father figures: Her dead father, Pokrovsky the tutor, *his* father, and Makar, who sometimes writes to her as a father would to his daughter.

Coincidentally, Pokrovsky's father bears a stunning resemblance to Makar in that they are both self-confessed failures. Pokrovsky tries to avoid this terrible fate: He works

hard as a tutor and attends school. However, Pokrovsky falls ill and dies. Varinka's memory of Pokrovsky is so potent that she seems to judge her life by his ambitious standards, or at least the high bar she thought he had for her. She is, in a way, keeping his memory alive by judging her life as he would.

4. Forgetful Varinka

Given Varvara's unyielding admiration for Pokrovsky during his life, and after his death, it is quite significant when she forgets valuable information about her time with him. Such a forgetting suggests Freud's discussion of the "Forgetting of Proper Names" where he connects "forgetting" to repression. He discusses this as an interplay of two mental events, one where you attempt to repress an impulse or drive that you do not want, which itself is a representative of a theme you wish to repress (Freud 1956, 11-13), the other when you are trying to recall a name.

Freud's psychoanalysis of his patients helped him realize that in the process of recalling the name the repressed event emerges in a related representation, though the connection has many twists and turns. Your unconscious mind sets up a mental map to an unwanted theme and its corollary event. Because both are unwanted, the mind sets up different labels in its place to block you from accessing it directly; however, those blocks themselves have logical connections to that unwanted theme because your unconscious already set up the map. When you try to remember a name that is tangentially and remotely connected to the unwanted event, the unconscious mind calls attention to the unwanted, seeking exposure. Essentially, your mind is taking the opportunity, with the "forgetting" situation, to recall the unwanted for you by bringing up a longer path to a different name that is still related to the unwanted. You will get the name later along the way, but not until you go through the mental roadmap that makes you confront the terrible impulse that was stirred by the event that your unconscious represses.

Varinka does not forget names, but she does forget something interesting about her interaction with Pokrovsky. She forgets a book he gave her to read. She writes in her letter to Makar:

'It is dull for you, sitting alone,' he (Pokrovsky) said to me. 'Here is a book; take it, it won't be so dull, anyway.'

I took it; I don't remember what the book was like; I hardly glanced into it, though I did not sleep all night. A strange inward excitement would not let me sleep; I could not remain sitting still; several times I got up from the chair and walked about the room. A sort of inward content was suffused through my whole being. I was so glad of Pokrovsky's attention. I was proud of his anxiety and uneasiness about me. I

spent the whole night, musing and dreaming. Pokrovsky did not come in again, and I knew he would not come, and I wondered about the following evening.

The next evening, when everyone in the house had gone to bed, Pokrovsky opened his door and began talking to me, standing in the doorway of his room. I do not remember now a single word of what we said to one another; I only remember that I was shy, confused, vexed with myself and looked forward impatiently to the end of the conversation, though I had been desiring it intensely, dreaming of it all day, and making up my questions and answers [...]. The first stage of our friendship began from that evening. All through mother's illness we spent several hours together every night. I got over my shyness by degrees, though after every conversation I found something in it to be vexed with myself about. Yet with secret joy and proud satisfaction I saw that for my sake he was beginning to forget his insufferable books. (Dostoevsky 1960, 174-175)

Varvara wants Pokrovsky to "forget his insufferable books" and to focus on her. It is interesting for her to desire this from Pokrovsky considering Freud's analysis of forgetting: She desires for someone she cares about to temporarily not care for things he is committed to. It is even fun for her as she writes "with secret joy" that she was happy to accomplish this and to perhaps be the source of his nervousness. In Freud's 1910 lecture printed in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* and entitled "The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis," he writes

I had substantiated the fact that the forgotten data were not lost. They were in the possession of the patient, ready to emerge and form associations with his other mental content, but hindered from becoming conscious, and forced to remain in the unconscious by some sort of a force. The existence of this force could not be assumed with certainty, for in attempting to drag up the unconscious memories into the consciousness of the patient, in opposition to this force, one got the sensation of his own personal effort striving to overcome it. One could get an idea of this force, which maintained the pathological situation, from resistance of the patient. (Freud 1925, 36)

Varvara speaks of the pleasure in making Pokrovsky forget with such honesty that it would be difficult to say of her that she has personally forgotten anything herself. Yet, she forgot the name of the book Pokrovsky gave her in favor of the memory of her hoping she forgets *his* books, not their names of course, but she hopes he forgets his whole desire to read them. It is an odd item for her to forget when books are a core feature of Pokrovsky's personality. So, she wants Pokrovsky to forget himself for her, and this is the "forgotten data" that are "ready to emerge" from Varvara. Varinka writes:

Memories are always tormenting, whether they are glad or bitter, it is so with me, anyway; but even the torment is sweet. And when the heart grows heavy, sick, weary, and sad, then memories refresh and revive it, as the drops of dew on a moist evening after a hot day refresh and revive a poor sickly flower, parched by the midday heat. (Dostoevsky 1960, 176)

From Freud's perspective, Varinka is right in writing that "memories are always tormenting." Varinka accepts the vibrancy of her memories and their medley of emotions. Rather than hold them in, she openly shares them with Makar and so navigates repressed instincts. Her candidness toward her life suggests that the trauma she suffered from her father's and Pokrovsky's deaths is something that wants to unfurl: The unconscious wants to announce them, seemingly from a countering instinct to be free. So, by all appearances, Varinka does not wish to hide her torment. For her, not all torment is painful. Rather, she simply wants to talk, verbally wade in her muddy and beautiful memories, and perhaps find some understanding from Makar.

5. Makar's Repression

Dostoevsky portrays Makar's desires to be with Varinka by showing how Makar promotes his friendly and fatherly side, all the while keeping his romantic intentions repressed. Freud writes that "sexual instincts [...] seem to the ego to constitute a danger which threatens its self-preservation or its self-esteem" (Freud 1917, 138). Makar is likely afraid of what his desires for Varinka could mean for his self-worth, opting to a father figure and friend first, though the reader knows there's an underlying current of romance. Makar reveals himself to the reader as being an odd mix of father/friend/wannabe lover. He is not honest about his "irreconcilable wish." Freud writes,

In all those experiences, it had happened that a wish had been aroused, which was in sharp opposition to the other desires of the individual and was not capable of being reconciled with the ethical, aesthetic and personal pretensions of the patient's personality. There had been a short conflict, and the end of this inner struggle was the repression of the idea which presented itself to the consciousness as the bearer of this irreconcilable wish. This was, then, repressed from consciousness and forgotten. (Freud 1925, 36-37)

Makar wants to possess Varinka. He wants Varinka to want and need him even though he cannot provide for her. From this incongruence of desire and capacity to fulfill desire, it is psychologically unhealthy for them to consort with each other, unless he is forthright about his libidinal desires, but this never happens. She does not return his fatherly and friendly external forms of affection, and toward the end of the novel, when Varinka leaves to marry someone else, Makar nervously and desperately writes for her to wait for him. This is consistent with Freud when he says, "The ego then assumes the defensive, denies the sexual instincts the satisfaction they desire and forces them into those by-paths of substitutive satisfaction which become manifest in nervous symptoms" (Freud 1917, 138). However, for

Makar, to give up desiring Varinka is to give up his only existential outlet. His *self* is tied up in her reciprocation, the only thing that sustains his existential middle.

7. Makar's Repression and Varvara's Honesty

For Freud, people cannot help but reveal their repression, and so it is the case for Makar: He reveals his existential situation through displaying his inability to let go of what could have been of his life. Bluntly, his yearnings are *to be* immature and inappropriate for what his life amounts to now. His current life is one of drinking, being in debt, and being mistreated by neighbors. Makar's correspondence with Varinka shows that he needs something from her, but that he has repressed that desire, shrouding it in servility and obsequiousness to *her* friendship needs. He needs to care for his health, but instead of doing that, Makar tries to make Varinka care for him. An incompatibility presents itself: What he wants does not fit what can be. Freud writes,

The incompatibility of the idea in question with the 'ego' of the patient was the motive of the repression, the ethical and other pretensions of the individual were the repressing forces. The presence of the incompatible wish, or the duration of the conflict, had given rise to a high degree of mental pain; this pain was avoided by the repression. This latter process is evidently in such a case a device for the protection of the personality. (Freud 1925, 36-37)

Unless one is honest about such an inner desire through open discussion, a person cannot come to grips with that revelation. Psychoanalysis provides the outlet for honesty. As Freud says, "Come, let yourself be taught something on this point! What is in your mind does not coincide with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things" (Freud 1917, 143). For this reason, Varvara begins to mentally surpass Makar, principally after discussing her troubled past in her longest letter to him. Varinka's letters are her psychoanalysis.

Facing the dread of oneself by being honest liberates individuals to make necessary choices. Varvara is honest with Makar. She genuinely cares for his well-being. She wants to be platonically loved by him. Varinka is not "there" in the way he thinks she is and because he cannot see this, he does not see that his writings may not actually be to her, but his having a discussion with himself. She becomes the object for him to invest his hopes for himself. A look into repression may suggest that all his advice to her about enduring her poor condition is really entreaties to himself to be more than what he is. The repressed desire to be greater than what he is conceals itself over the years, but since Makar does not uncover what that desire really is, Varvara becomes the placeholder of that desire: She represents Makar's possibility of being more.

8. Existential Issues

At some point, everyone wants to be more than what they currently are. A short person may want to be tall. An uneducated person may want an education. It's a simple movement from "I am not" to "I am," but in *Poor People* the move takes on an existential layer. The "I am not" comes from the assessment of what one is now and what one does not have. Makar's repression of his self-negation manifests itself in the derivative self-affirmation he gets from loving Varinka. He affirms his love *at* Varinka, but they are not sharing in that love.

Varinka does not seem to have an issue with disclosure. Varinka is the proverbial "open book." Her honesty showcases an acceptance of her life. Youthful, but sickly, Varvara understands that life is filled with toil and that one must make the necessary decision to move ahead. When she ultimately gives in to marrying an overbearing man of good means, she worries, but does not seem to think that it is a worse decision than *not* doing it. She simply aims at increasing her lot in life. In this sense, she does not want to "miss the boat." In fact, she may even incorporate her understanding of Makar to deduce the consequences of "missing the boat." That a person, like Makar, will continue to suffer into old age until the end. The key to Varvara's swerving from that type of miss was to accept herself, her past and present. She affirms herself and then makes choices, but she does it earlier in life than Makar. Essentially, Dostoevsky brings two materially similar, but psychologically and existentially opposing characters together.

9. Speaking of Opposites

Delving further into the opposition represented by Makar's and Varinka's friendship, Dostoevsky has Varvara honestly recalling her memories with Pokrovsky. She trusts that Makar will want to read about her life because he has repeatedly established that he will do anything for her under the accord of friendship. Their correspondence is important to set up a contrast which reveals an existential situation for both. However, only Varvara brazenly turns inward. Freud writes,

So we can say that if we set out from the last memories of the patient to look for a repressed complex, that we have every prospect of discovering it, if only the patient will communicate to us a sufficient number of the ideas which come into his head. So we let the patient speak along any line that he desires, and cling to the hypothesis that nothing can occur to him except what has some indirect bearing on the complex that we are seeking. (Freud 1925, 45)

I suppose that, technically speaking, Varvara and Makara speak freely. Though it seems that Varvara provides more information. Freud may conclude that by revealing more, she may merely be presenting blocks to hide the repressed memories or desires. Though this would be a difficult assertion when Varvara says,

Pokrovsky was attentive to me and kept seeking an opportunity to speak to me alone, but I would not let him. It was the happiest day of all those four years of my life.

And now come sad, bitter memories, and I begin the story of my gloomy days. That is why, perhaps, my pen moves more slowly and seems to refuse to write more. That is why, perhaps, I have dwelt in memory with such eagerness and such love on the smallest details of my trivial existence in my happy days. Those days were so brief; they were followed by grief, black grief, and God only knows when it will end. (Dostoevsky 1960, 183)

Pokrovsky becomes ill and dies. So, what then? Varvara faces her pain and admits promoting the happy times to somehow deal with the bitter ones. Makar is different. Once again, Dostoevsky sets up a dichotomy: The person who confronts through openness and the person who does not confront by sublimating his instincts through obsequiousness and resignation. Makar responds to Varvara's honesty by hiding behind his complaints and declarations of friendly love. After Varvara's autobiography of her pain and happiness, Makar replies that he cannot match her aptitude for description, rather, "I have no talent for it. If I smudge a dozen papers, there's nothing to show for it; I can't describe anything. I have tried" (Dostoevsky 1960, 187). Makar self-deprecates. He depreciates himself before his dialectical other and reinforces their psychological and existential opposition. This appears to be a deliberate move by Dostoevsky. He is, through these characters, making the reader move up and down, back and forth, frank unconcealment in the freest character, meek concealment in the most unfree.

Makar eventually shares his past, but Dostoevsky writes this letter as if Makar's life is just an inventory. He writes, "I will begin with when I was seventeen and went into the service, and soon the thirtieth year of my career there will be here. Well, I needn't say I have worn out many a uniform; I grew to manhood and to good sense and saw something of the world; I have lived [...]" (Dostoevsky 1960, 188). Unsurprisingly, Makar writes about how he has been abused by others. He complains, "I have been badly treated by malicious people! I tell you, my own, that though I am an obscure person, a stupid person, perhaps, yet I have my feelings like anyone else" (Dostoevsky 1960, 188). Makar blames others and likens himself to an innocent, walking about the world, just minding his business. He asks rhetorical questions repeatedly throughout this letter, but it is odd that in his first reply to Varvara's bittersweet autobiography, he gripes.

Varinka's autobiographical letter is a flourishing expression of longing, nostalgia, and persevering through misery; however, Makar, in the penultimate paragraph of his autobiographical inventory, he writes about being a good copy clerk despite the malice with which people treat him. He says, "My handwriting is good," but that he writes "artlessly" and that if people even go so far as to liken him to a rat, then that's just fine because "the rat is necessary, but the rat is of service, but the rat is depended upon, but the rat is given a reward, so that's the sort of rat he is!" (Dostoevsky 1960, 189)

10. Underground Anxiety

If Makar is a necessary rat, then what is Varinka? Dostoevsky never has Makar referring to her as a rat, but Makar does find her necessary, she is necessary to his happiness. An existential situation emerges. Dostoevsky unites Makar and Varinka together in this correspondence because they represent the existential middle within any individual. They are the "I am" and "I am not" at the base of their story, and any story for that matter. Varinka takes it further to be "I am more than I am," but Makar is pleased with "I am no more than I am now." Thus, he remains a self-proclaimed "necessary rat." Yet, what is the opposite of the rat in this dialectic? Perhaps it would help to refer to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* where the narrator starts "I am a sick man [...] I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" (Dostoevsky 1960, 25). Our *Notes* narrator is the underground of life. He is the repressed of society, under self-imposed quarantine because he does not want to risk the disease of complacency that he observes in almost everyone around him. He meets one of the only people he can confide in, a sex worker. She does what she must to survive, and he harangues her because she does not labor in *his* kind of mental suffering. He resents her ability to continue with life.

Makar, unlike the *Notes* narrator, does not exude hostility, but is meek. Ernest J. Simmons writes that Makar is Dostoevsky's first "meek" type; this is the type that is trying not to mentally break under the weight of the world. This meek person is usually distinguished against a background of stronger and more expressive characters who usually do not willfully challenge the meek one because they are just going about their business.

Varvara is not meek. She's not a self-described rat. She is not underground though she is poor and may sometimes metaphorically feel underneath everyone. Rather, in this story, she is unconcealment incarnate. If Makar is an underground rat, then Varinka is an above ground person. This is evident in the fact that she seems to face the world and learn from it in a richer way than Makar does. He gains resentment from his insights. She gains lucidity about choices from hers. In the end, she decides to live comfortably, understanding that she will have to grow accustomed to her new husband, but also knowing that her

choice improves her life above ground despite not loving him. Meanwhile, the effect of her choice brings Makar into a state of anxiety. He begins to lose her. Her choice to marry and leave her squalor offers no soft transition for Makar to choose differently.

11. Rat Men

Rats appear significant in psychological and philosophical explanations of anxiety. In Freud's "Case of Obsessional Neurosis ('Rat Man')," the "Rat Man," (also known as Dr. Lorenz) worries about marrying his fiancée, referred to in Freud's notes as "the lady." The Rat Man's dreams and obsessions are: 1. Dying; 2. Masturbation; 3. "The Rat" torture device; and 4. Feeling responsible for his father's death. At the time of Freud's analysis, Dr. Lorenz is in his late 20s. Makar is much older than Dr. Lorenz. Though unlike Makar, Dr. Lorenz is not a meek type. Yet, they are both repressed. While Dr. Lorenz frets over how his obsessions will play out in the future, Makar worries about only one aspect of his future: Whether Varinka will be in it.

Dr. Lorenz dreams about swords, clothing rags taken by a flowing river, and he believes in the prophetic nature of his dreams. Makar also believes in the significance of dreams enough to wax philosophical about shoemakers. He writes,

"There, in some smoky corner, in some damp hole, which, through poverty, passes as a lodging, some workman wakes up from his sleep; and all night he has been dreaming of boots, for instance, which he had accidentally slit the day before, as though a man ought to dream of such nonsense! But he's an artisan, he's a shoemaker; it's excusable for him to think of nothing but his own subject." (Dostoevsky 1960, 246)

He goes on to tell Varinka that "everyone of us is a bit of a shoemaker" and that the rich man who worries about his boots has no need to worry about them. Makar relays this message to Varinka, almost priming her to accept being poor because, after all, we are all shoemakers, in a way. Thus, his message to Varinka is that she is too "rich" in heart to worry about material things.

Makar wants to morally guide Varinka in the rat life by glorifying it as a noble shoemaker kind of existence. However, his moral message ends up being self-sacrificing, a trait that Varinka is tired of having: Makar gives his last few kopeks to a friend who may be exaggerating his need for the money or, who, in the very least, needs the money because of wasteful spending (Dostoevsky makes the friend's need ambiguous). Makar demonstrates that he lives by the very principle that he just instilled in Varinka. However, living like this only serves to make Makar poor. Makar justifies serving someone else before himself.

By contrast, Freud's Rat Man, tries to undo this sacrificial trait. The Rat Man discusses his girlfriend's incessant urging to take a test on a certain date, "You might manage

to obey the command to take your examination at the earliest moment in October. But if you received a command to cut your throat, what then?" (Freud 1995, 312). Freud notes that the Rat Man "told himself not to be more cowardly on his own account than on others," (1995, 312), an indication that the Rat Man understands the danger of prioritizing others' commands before his own. This worry manifests itself again. In Freud's notes on the Rat Man, he writes, "'Carrion Crow', as his eldest sister called him. He is constantly killing people so that afterwards he can make his way into someone's good graces" (319). The Rat Man understands that over-extending oneself through self-sacrifice could lead to self-annihilation.

Makar exhibits this as well: He wants to help others even if it is against his material interests to do so. Doing so, he may qualify himself for martyrdom. He suffers so that others may succeed, as the Rat Man is prone to do. Unlike Dr. Lorenz though, Makar does not turn inward to reflect on this instinct. The reader can imagine Makar saying to himself, "If someone commands me to cut my throat then for what reason should I refuse?"

12. Facing Your Dreams

After Varvara and her mother fell ill, Varinka began to have frightening dreams. She relays this to Makar in her letters, preferring not to describe them in too much detail but instead being honest about her general mood toward them. She writes

"You don't love me Makar Alexyevitch, and I am sometimes very sad all alone. Sometimes, especially when it is getting dark, one sits, one sits all alone. Fedora goes off somewhere, one sits and sits and thinks—one remembers all the past, joyful and sad alike—it all passes before one's eyes, it all rises up as though out of a mist. Familiar faces appear (I am almost beginning to see them in reality)—I see mother most often of all [...] And what dreams I have! I feel that I am not well, I am so weak; to-day, for instance, when I got out of bed this morning, I turned giddy; and I have such a horrid cough, too! I feel, I know, that I shall soon die. Who will bury me? Who will follow my coffin! Who will grieve for me!" (Dostoevsky 1960, 199)

Dostoevsky's portrayal of Varvara perpetually being sick throughout *Poor People* exemplifies the fragility of her existence. She is always on the cusp of breaking down and undergoes several mini crises, sometimes seemingly exaggerating her conditions, which is why Makar tries to relieve her of her worries. Yet, as we continually return to, Varinka *wants* to deal with her worries. She wants to explore her dreams. She exemplifies Freud's bedrock rule of psychoanalysis, "to speak freely, without censorship, no matter how insignificant or senseless or disagreeable it might be" (Freud 1995, 310). Varinka seems at ease with saying anything to Makar. He is therapeutic for her. Varvara speaks so freely to Mak-

ar, but he often quells her attempts to disclose her dreams with the justification that he just wants her to be happy.

My precious Varvara Alexyevna,

leave off worrying yourself, I wonder you are not ashamed. Come, give over, my angel! How is it such thoughts come into your mind? You are not ill, my love, you are not ill at all; you are blooming, you are really blooming; a little pale, but still blooming. And what do you mean by these dreams, these visions? For shame, my darling, give over; you must simply laugh at them. Why do I sleep well? Why is nothing wrong with me? You should look at me, my dear soul. I get along all right, I sleep quietly, I am as healthy and hearty as can be, a treat to look at. Give over, give over, darling, for shame. You must reform. I know your little ways, my dearie; as soon as any trouble comes, you begin fancying things and worrying about something. For my sake give over, my darling." (Dostoevsky 1960, 200)

Recall from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* that of the many reasons why people forget them is that "most people take very little interest in their dreams" (Freud 1965, 78). Makar does not just want Varinka to forget her dreams but encourages her to be ashamed of dreaming because it vexes her so. By telling Varinka to "simply laugh at them" and to "give over," Makar disregards the possibilities to know his friend more. Freud writes, "Dreams are disconnected, they accept the most violent contradictions without the least objection, they admit impossibilities, they disregard knowledge which carries great weight with us in the daytime, they reveal us as ethical and moral imbeciles. Anyone who when he was awake behaved in the sort of way that is shown in situations in dreams would be considered insane." (Freud 1965, 87)

However, Makar does not want Varinka to spend any more time on dreams than necessary. For him, it is already enough that she dreams horrific images that do not live up to the ideal of being a "blooming angel."

13. Conclusion

In refusing to engage in Varinka's dreams, Makar holds her back from understanding herself. He treats her as he treats himself. Makar negates realizing possibilities about himself and so, as her friend, he cajoles Varinka to do the same. Nevertheless, she resists. Varinka affirms her possibilities through her honesty. From a Freudian analysis, she is authentically portraying herself, insofar as she's being honest with herself about her life, along with her willingness to overcome the existential middle of her life. Makar, negating himself, strives to be-for-her (the quintessential Freudian "rat"), yet he denies knowing her as he has denied knowing himself. It may be that he unconsciously represses his desire to

have others know him by acting in a deferential way to others. He gives others money. He chases after Varinka. He is, indeed, acting like a rat man in his way. For her part, Varinka loves Makar's attention, but since she does *not* repress her desire to better her status in life, she leaves her home to be with her new fiancé, Bykov, who promises her an immediate future of fewer sick days, a life above ground.

Dostoevsky's *Poor People* expresses the core existential issue of being more than what one is. For much of *Poor People*, Makar tries to have a life of meaning, but he uses mistakenly uses Varinka to get there. He does not turn inward as she does but is content to express his love for her by masking what he is not doing for himself. Varvara understands the necessity to worry about one's "shoes" (to recall Makar's shoemaker dream) and so keeps herself grounded in the needs of reality. They both might live in a kind of metaphorical underground, but her willingness to assess her life in its complete naked brutality allows her a way out. She uses this openness to freely choose. Unfortunately for Makar, he is repressed, and he covers himself in layers of infatuation for Varvara, never having to expose his true needs to himself.

Through Freud's psychoanalysis, we see something in *Poor People* that is seldom discussed: The need for realizing one's authenticity. The reader can tell something is off between the two, but the theme of needing to see oneself is clear: Dostoevsky was likely using Makar and Varinka as a composite of the war within oneself. The human struggle to simply be okay with oneself.

How do we reconcile the need to disclose ourselves with the fear of realizing we are nothing more than what we are? How do we reconcile the attempt to live in truth with the habit of living through lies? These are contradictions that an individual works through, but we see, by applying Freud's psychoanalytic method to Dostoevsky's *Poor People*, that a fruitful way is to be honest, so that we are not weighed down by layers that only protect us from the truth of what we have been and who we are. This is what Makar suffers from. This is what Freud tried to uncover with his patients (the "Rat Man" being one of them), and this is what Dostoevsky plunged into the depths of in *Poor People*. As Freud writes, "Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself!" (Freud 1917, 143). In the abyss of our human existence, we find strife in an existential middle in which the only way above ground is to search into the depths of our underground.

Dr. Jesús H. Ramirez, University of South Florida,
jesusramirez[at]mail.usf.edu

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